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AUTHOR Gragg, Michele; Tcachuk, Alejandra
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ABSTRACT

The two most commonly used language proficiency tests offered in the United States by foreign countries' chambers of commerce are those of Spain and France. The Spanish test has been introduced recently and has no rigorous and uniform set of rules governing its administration at all centers. Issues arising from the administration of this exam include questions of the foreign agency's responsibility and the school's legal responsibility, testing consistency, grading, discrepancies in regional usage, and the target audience. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Madria has been cooperative and responsive to questions and suggestions about test administration, and has proven interested in the adequacy of the test centers chosen in the United States. The French language certificate exam offered by the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Paris, consisting of written and oral segments, is well documented for the test administration centers. The test has become increasingly rigorous in recent years, and some knowledge of the exam's format and content would be helpful to institutions in planning curricula leading to it. In addition, coordination of the exam's difficulty level as it is administered in various test centers is advisable for consistency. (MSE)

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PROFICIENCY EXAMS OFFERED BY CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE: LEGAL AND PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS

By

Dr. Michèle Gragg

Department of French

Rosary College

River Forest, Illinois

and

Dr. Alejandra Tcachuk

Department of Hispanic Studies

Rosary College

River Forest, Illinois

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PROFICIENCY EXAMS OFFERED BY CHAMBERS OF COMMERCE: LEGAL AND PEDAGOGICAL ASPECTS

Michele Gragg & Alejandra Tcachuk

Rosary College

River Forest, Ill.

One of the most valuable tools introduced in recent times for the purpose of measuring foreign language proficiency in business and the professions consists of exams adminstered by various foreign Chambers of Commerce in the United States. The two most frequently offered to this date are the Spanish and the French exams.

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY OF MADRID

Introduction of the Spanish exam has been rather recent and so far there is no rigorous and uniform set of rules to govern its administration at all centers. In fact, the number of such centers is still very limited. As the Proficiency Exam becomes more widely known and the number of centers increases, the problem of consistency may become more acute in the future.

Rosary College was appointed as one of the centers in the Spring of 1984. The initial guidelines received from the Madrid Chamber of Commerce specified that each center was responsible for the composition of its own exam. Apparently there was not one single test but rather a series of exams sponsered by the Chamber of Commerce. One problem became obvious: uncertainty as to where the responsiblility for the exam actually lies, and possible future legal repercussions of this uncertainty.

Consequently Rosary College decided to request the Chamber to prepare the text of the exam. What the College received in response was considered too brief and easy, in addition to being worded in a style unfamiliar to students trained in the U.S. All this was brought to the attention of the Chamber, together with a more complex version of their original exam as prepared by the Spanish Department of Rosary College. This was satisfactory to both parties as to length, content, and wording. So far, then, responsibility for the text of the exam is shared by the College and the Chamber of Commerce, which signifies its presence and approval by preparing the exam on their letterhead and by affixing their signature and official stamp on every page of the exam.

In order to further convey to the students the degree of involvement by the Chamber, Rosary College emphasizes its own role as AGENT and even then only to the extent of providing the best possible course training and subsequent preparation for the exam. Actual participation is exclusively

the decision of each applicant, and he/she is required to sign a statement to that effect attached to the application. The College does not influence their decision in any way. Participants are also informed that the Spanish Department of Rosary College has no control whatsoever over the grading system. Tests are set by registered airmail to Madrid immediately upon conclusion of the oral exam, which is conducted in the presence of a representative from the Chamber in the Chicago area. Results are received several weeks later.

The Madrid Chamber of Commerce and Industry is open to constructive criticism and suggestions, as reflected in their new set of guidelines received prior to the 1985 exam (May 6 and May 7). It is stated, for example, that candidates should demonstrate ""la capacidad de expresarse aun cuando se respete el acento nativo." This might be interpreted as applying to (1) non-native speakers of Spanish and (2) bilingual speakers of Spanish American origin. Under this second interpretation it would seem that allowances have been made for possible discrepancies in language between Spanish and Spanish American usage.

Though unsolicited by Rosary College, the Madrid Chamber of Commerce has provided copies of a few graded exams. Thus it is possible to determine -- to a certain extent -- what is the grading procedure, aside from the obvious errors involving grammatical points, syntax, and business terminology and concepts. Certain terms that denote Spanish American usage (for example, *carro* for *auto*, *reservación* for *reserva*,

posicion for *puesto*, and *transportación* for *transporte*) have been marked as mistakes in the 1984 exam and circled accordingly. It is perhaps this type of discrepancy that has now prompted the Chamber to include the provision with respect to the "acento nativo."

At least in theory this Proficiency Exam is aimed at "foreign students." However, the new guidelines do not include the previous requirement that applicant from Spanish-speaking countries would not be accepted as candidates. This ban on native Spanish-speakers could hardly be enforced legally in the United States. From a moral standpoint there would be no justification in discriminating against such applicants and withholding from them this additional and valuable tool in today's fierce competitive market. If the Chamber were to insist on such requirements, the problem might be solved by offering two exams at different levels: one for the native speaker of Spanish and the other for those who speak it as a second language.

Despite the Chamber's efforts to come more into line with U.S. practices and needs, there is no doubt that the problem of lack of consistency will have to be faced sooner or later, when sufficient funds are available to make possible the necessary meeting of minds. Meanwhile, pending a concerted effort to give representatives from the various centers a chance to meet with each other and with the Chamber of Commerce. the validity and prestige of the Proficiency Exam will continue to be assured by the present high standards of

quality and fairness that the centers have set for themselves; also, by the clear-cut policy of the Chamber to appoint a center only after careful scrutiny of its background, seriousness of purpose, and reputation.

CHAMBER OF COMMMERCE AND INDUSTRY - PARIS (C.C.I.P.) (1)

The C.C.I.P. offers two exams: the Certificate and the Diploma. The introduction of these exams is not recent. To speak only of the Chicago area, the University of Illinois in Chicago has been a pioneer in preparing students for the Certificate since as far back as 1979. Since then Rosary College beginning in 1982, the Alliance Francaise (2) together with St. Xavier College in 1983, and De Paul University in 1984 have become centers which prepare their students for the Certificate. This paper will focus mainly on this exam and the problems raised by the written and oral parts.

The organization of the examinations, as well as their administration, are given a detailed explanation in a brochure entitled "Examens de Francais des Affaires pour Etrangers" as well as in a guideline circulated in the form of six mimeographed pages (3), and which describes the examination sessions, their preparation, organization, and administration.

The written exam which leads to the Certificate consists of four parts: a) a sixty-minute test to control

linguistic knowledge, both general and as applied to commerce and industry (definitions, multiple-choice, questions, etc.); b) a sixty-minute test of text comprehension; c) a forty-five-minute test of conventions of correspondence; d) a sixty-minute translation test (sentences or short texts from English into French and French into English). The brochure mentioned above provides more details on the exam. The exam is entirely prepared by the C.C.I.P., and teachers in the centers have no role in drawing it up. This confers a certain neutrality on an exam which is widely recognized and prestigious. Moreover, the C.C.I.P. provides us with samples of exams given in the Winter, Summer, and special sessions. Thus we do have an idea of the different kinds of tests that can be administered. It is possible, for example, to use these samples to build up "mock-exams," and to prepare students for the type of tests they will encounter. In the course of the years, the content of the written part of the Certificate exam has changed. If we compare a 1979 sample with a recent one, the latter will be clearly seen to be more difficult. This is not a criticism, of course. The more the number of interested students grows, the more it is necessary to be careful about maintaining the level of the examination.

In view of the increasing rigor of the examinations, in order to improve the quality of the students' performance in these exams it would help immensely to develop introductory courses, and to build up a year-long sequence of three courses (in a quarter system) or two courses (in a semester system). However, liberal arts colleges sometimes encounter

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difficulties in changing a humanities-oriented curriculum, and language departments run the risk of being accused of multiplying courses for a limited number of students. In view of this, the experience of Rosary College can perhaps illustrate some ways of overcoming some of these difficulties.

For the first time this year, I gave an introductory course on Business French for students who are at an intermediate level of language skill. The purpose of this course is to familiarize the student with the basic vocabulary of French commerce and industry. The chapters taken up are closely related to their actual life (for example, advertisement, basic banking operations, transportation, post office, telephone, telex, insurance). Questions of French resources and the Common Market are presented at a very simple level. The students are also introduced to commercial correspondence and the reading and interpretation of business texts, together with a modicum of translation. (At this level the "Journal Francais d'Amerique" is a very good source.) This course, French 251, is taken by students who not only have had the basic and intermediate courses in the French language, but also an intensive French reading course. The students are usually sophomores, and the course is given in the Spring. In their junior year they can take the French for Business (French 351), which leads to the Certificate of the Chamber of Commerce. This course, given in the spring, is preceded in the fall by a course in contemporary French culture and civilization already existing in the curriculum. This new sequence of courses seems to provide the students with a good

preparation towards the Certificate.

But it would be also very helpful for the teachers to have an exact idea of the way the exams are graded. We do know the amount of points which are alloted to each test section. But we do not know how these points are actually awarded: what is considered as an important mistake, as a minor mistake; how a short essay, how the translations are graded; etc. etc. All teachers should have some guidelines on these questions in order to prepare through their own testing the students who are going to sit for the real exam. It should be possible either to make some kind of mock exam copy with examples of mistakes to be avoided -- or to send back one (anonymous?) copy of a student who failed, and whose mistakes seem to be very characteristic of what to avoid. This should be understood as a dialogue between the examiners in Paris and the teachers in the United States.

Another problem is the great difference between regular students at college or university level and adults who belong to continuing education centers, for example the Alliance Francaise, whose level of language is often more advanced, whose maturity and sometimes experience in business cannot be compared with what is found in the usual undergraduate student. This adult level cannot be expected to be taken as the norm for those sitting for the examination, since the Certificate, it must be remembered, was originally created as an examination for students, and not as a competitive exam. It is sufficient to reward the outstanding students by according

them special honors, without penalizing the student who simply displayed enough competence to pass.

The oral part of the examination consists of a fifteen-minute discussion of a text chosen from the business-economic press, and a fifteen-minute translation of an English text into French. For this part of the examination also, it is time to coordinate the level of difficulty of the exams as administered in various centers. This coordination should occur at the level of a city or region, depending on the number of centers existing in a given area. But all teachers, commercial attaches, and professional persons who are involved in the examination should be notified of the periodicals and newspapers read by the students and translated by them. There again some guidelines should be approved by the body of people who deal with the examination.(4)

All of this should not be taken as a negative evaluation of an examination which remains as an inspiration and a challenge for our students who decide that they need or want to acquire a competence in this domain of language skills. The examination stands as a meaningful goal, as a mark of progress toward a desired end, and as a prestigious accomplishment of which the student has reason to be proud. With some fine-tuning it can become an even better integrated component of a new dimension in language education.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Address:

Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris

Direction de l'Enseignement

Service des Examens pour etrangers

14 rue Chateaubriand

75008 Paris

France

Tel: (1) 561-99-00.

2. The Alliance Francaise, for the first time this year, presented three candidates for the Diploma. I was one of the jury members for the oral part.

3. The C.C.I.P. furnishes all information free of cost. Simply write to the Director, Mr. Jacques Cartier at the address indicated in note 1.

4. At the time this paper is being revised, I would like to point out an initiative of the Alliance Francaise: for the oral examination of the Certificate held in June, 1985, the same text for comment was offered to all the candidates of each individual jury. The translations for the candidates were different, but all taken out of the same article. Although this procedure limits the range of texts presented by a single jury, it does seem to help equalize the chances of the different candidates of that jury.